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Honolulu rail route too close to runways, may have to shift

City, state, federal officials will discuss options today

By **Sean Hao**
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The city's planned route for a new \$5.3 billion rail system runs too close to runways at Honolulu International Airport, and that has become a major sticking point holding up the project.

City, state and federal officials will meet today to discuss how the train can serve Honolulu International Airport without encroaching on airspace that's reserved for airport operations.

The current route down Aolele Street through Ke'ehi Lagoon Park will need to be moved mauka or will require changes to the airport including runway alterations, according to government officials .

The airport issue could delay the city's release of a final environmental impact statement, which is needed before construction can begin.

The delay "could be anything from probably a

week from now to getting delayed three to six months," said City Council Chairman Todd Apo, who was one of four council members briefed on the issue by the Federal Transit Administration last week in Washington, D.C. "If the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) says you've got to move your rail line, then there will probably need to be a change to the rail EIS, which will add three to six months and possibly more depending on what issues are crossed when you go on to that analysis."

Possible route changes as well as the impact of alternate routes will be discussed at today's meeting between the state Department of Transportation, FAA, FTA and the city.

Under current plans the elevated train track and a station planned for the intersection near Aolele Street and Lagoon Drive would be about four stories tall and less than 1,000 feet from airport runways. That encroaches on a runway airspace buffer created to keep buildings and other obstructions from affecting airplane operations, said state transportation Director Brennon Morioka.

"The current plan that goes down Aolele does impact the runway protection zone," he said. "Basically you can't construct in the runway protection zone.

"This is a structure that would be just as high as the (nearby highway) viaduct, but it would be much closer to the runway."

The city planned to break ground on the rail

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project last December; however, that was delayed by a prolonged review of the project's environmental impacts. The airport issue is now the main hang-up preventing the release of the project's final environmental impact statement.

timeline up in air

Once the EIS is finished, it must be approved by Gov. Linda Lingle before the city can start construction on the East Kapolei to Ala Moana project.

How long it will take to address the airport concerns and when construction on the project can begin depends on how soon the environmental impact study is released. That in turn depends on whether the city will need to change the current route in the airport area.

The FAA today will give the city the results of a preliminary review of the impacts of five possible rail alignments on airport operations, said FAA spokesman Ian Gregor. The agency would not disclose the routes considered or their airport impacts.

"We'll submit formal comments on the project's environmental impact statement within the next few weeks," Gregor said in an e-mail yesterday. "Until then, we cannot comment publicly on our preliminary review."

The City Council voted to divert the path of the train from Salt Lake to the airport in January 2009. That change added about \$220 million to the cost of the project, but was expected to generate higher ridership and greater community acceptance.

Options that the city could pursue to mitigate the train's airport impacts include moving the train's route closer to or on top of the Nimitz viaduct. The city also may be able to stick with the currently planned route, if the state is willing to make changes at the airport such as extending the length of the opposite ends of affected runways.

Whether to allow the city to build in the runway protection zone is up to the state, the FAA said. The state said what happens next depends on what the city decides to do, based on today's meeting.

"We're helping (the city) with that evaluation so that they have all the information they need to help them make a well-informed decision on which route is going to be best for this area," state transportation director Morioka said. "How much editing that needs to be done in the final EIS in this area really depends on what choices are made so that's part of the process we're going through right now."

City transportation director Wayne Yoshioka was unavailable for comment yesterday. However, it appears the city is not expecting to alter the train's route. Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann on Saturday said the rail project was in the "home stretch" of the environmental impact study process.

"It is our expectation that no more studies or analyses will be needed after the meeting (today), since this issue will have been thoroughly examined," Hannemann said in a news release. "All parties are committed to completing the FEIS (final environmental impact

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statement) for release. We are optimistic that, shortly after the conclusion of the airport issue, the FTA will authorize the release of the FEIS."

still major issue

Council members Romy Cachola and Ann Kobayashi, who also met with the FTA last week, said their impression was that the runway protection zone encroachment remains a major, unresolved issue.

"It's a big issue in the sense that we were told that without the FAA signing off, nothing will happen," said councilman Romy Cachola. The city "has to do something to correct it."

The airport issue as well as mitigation of the train's impact on mauka to makai views and historic sites still need to be addressed, Kobayashi said.

"For the (environmental impact study) this airport thing has to be settled," she said. "It'll be awhile. You can't just rush into things."

Today's meeting is closed to the public, and no City Council representative will attend.

Council member Ikaika Anderson, who also met with the FTA last week, said he unsuccessfully sought permission from the Hannemann administration to have the council represented at today's meeting.

"The administration did say they would share the results of that meeting and any documents that come out of it," Anderson said. "The reason that the council wants transparency on this issue is so that the public trust remains there ... so that the public has trust in its government."

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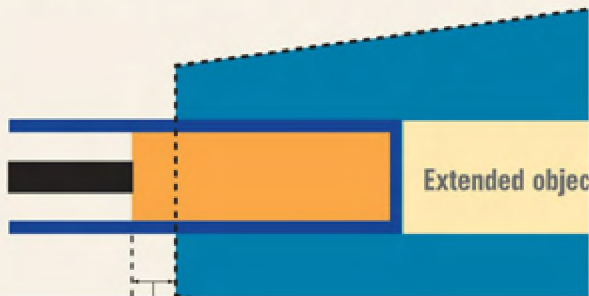
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